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ABSTRACT

Initiated in November 1989, the Exploring 4-H program in Indiana is a child care program providing delivery models and a 21-topic curriculum for use in existing 4-H clubs, after-school day care programs, day camps, summer programs, and library programs in both school and non-school settings. To evaluate the program and the effect of the setting on implementation, questionnaires were sent to the 118 program leaders. Sixty-three surveys were returned, a response rate of 53%. Study findings included the following: (1) 43% of the respondents used the program curriculum in clubs where children met with a volunteer leader, 27% in after school day care, 21% in day camps, 6% in libraries, and 3% in satellite programs; (2) adaptations to the program included use with Girl Scouts and youth groups and integration with other curriculum materials; (3) elements of the Exploring 4-H curriculum most frequently used included those focusing on self-esteem, self-care, and nutrition, and 68% of the respondents indicated that the lesson plan format was easy to use; (4) 75% of the respondents indicated that topics were mostly selected by adults, with only 12% indicating that children mostly selected topics; and (5) in general, the setting was not a factor in whether providers determined the program to be successful, though some club leaders indicated disappointment with the program's focus on non-competitiveness. (BCY)

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Variations on a Theme: A Comparison of a School-Age Child Care Curriculum in School and Non-School Settings

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Variations on a Theme: A Comparison of a School-Age Child Care Curriculum in School and Non-School Settings

Recent national events have brought the issue of children and families to the fore. The 1991 issuance of the final report of the National Commission on Children, entitled "Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families," signals a resurgence of national energy on children and family needs, including child care. The Commission recommended that government at all levels, communities, and employers continue to improve the availability, affordability, and quality of child care services for all children and families who need them. The recent attorney general confirmation hearings have drawn additional attention to the child care issue. Based on this increased scrutiny, it is particularly important to evaluate existing programs and to continue to develop programs which meet the child care needs of today's families.

The Exploring 4-H program in Indiana directed by the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service is one program that focuses on the child care needs of families with school age children. Through a series of activities and curricular materials, the Exploring 4-H program has been used in after-school child care programs, day camps, summer programs, and library programs which are offered in both school and non-school settings. This study sought to evaluate the Exploring 4-H program and its implementation in various settings. Through a written survey of child care providers who use the Exploring 4-H curriculum, program specifics such as curriculum subject areas, format of lesson plans, use of rewards, and training issues were examined. At the same time, a comparison of service delivery settings was conducted in order to determine if differences in setting affected how the curriculum materials were used. The results of this study enhance the development of new curriculum materials prepared for the Exploring 4-H program. In this way, this research not only reviews an existing program, but also impacts on-going child care concerns by providing information for on-going program development.

Background

Cooperative Extension Service is a cooperative effort of federal, state, and county governments to extend research-based information from each state's land grant university to the general public. Cooperative Extension focuses on three areas: agriculture, home economics, and youth development. There is an Extension office in every county in every state.

In the fall of 1988 the state advisory board of Indiana 4-H/Youth department expressed concern about the latchkey problem in the state, and that perhaps 4-H could play a role in this area. At that time 4-H in Indiana started at the age of 10, with younger age programs in different counties having differing activities and focuses.

Inquiries were made of 4-H latchkey programs in other states, efforts through parks and recreation programs, schools, libraries, churches, corporations, and communities to create programs for affected children. Not only programs, but curricula and types of

activities that were used in the hours after school were noted. Various programs focused on community development, providing hands-on activities, training for providers, and educating communities about the need to provide programs for children in need of care.

Exploring 4-H was developed for Indiana based on materials from California Cooperative Extension Service. It consists of two publications. One is a how-to book for setting up a school-age child care program. The other publication is a Curriculum Guide with 21 theme topics with an abundance of fun, hands-on activities that are developmentally age appropriate and educational. The philosophy of the Exploring 4-H program emphasis non-competition and focuses on experiential learning. Various delivery models were developed so that all children 6- to 9-years-old could benefit from the program and it could be implemented in clubs, libraries, day camps, and after-school programs.

The program was introduced in November of 1989. Extension agents attended a two-day training workshop to learn about the program and then implement it in their communities. County implementation varies depending on the resources and needs in their communities.

Exploring 4-H has been implemented for three years. The number of youth participating in programs has increased rapidly. Despite this rapid increase, community implementation strategies varied and no study existed on how each community implemented the program. For example, the two largest growing areas were thought to be in clubs and school-age child care, but we were not sure how often the programs met or how the materials were being used. It was also thought that a number of after-school programs were using the materials, but we needed to know more about how they were being used and how they fit into their program. Therefore, an evaluation of the program seemed appropriate in order to find out how it is being implemented, examine its strengths and weaknesses, and to provide direction for future support from the state office.

Methodology

Names of leaders and school-age child care programs where the materials were being used were gathered from county 4-H/Youth agents. Forty-six counties responded with the names of 118 volunteer leaders thought to be working with the Exploring 4-H curriculum. All of the volunteer leaders/providers were mailed surveys. Sixty-three of the 118 surveys mailed were returned (53%).

Results

Based on the written survey the following five areas of concern became evident: types of settings; ways program has been adapted; curriculum used; selection of topics; and impact of the program.

Types of Settings

Exploring 4-H has five delivery models in which the curriculum can be used. Respondents were asked which delivery model they used when working with youth. There were 67 responses, since some program providers operate more than one of the models. Of those responding, the Exploring 4-H curriculum is used most in clubs (43)%, followed by school-age child care (27%), day camps (21%), libraries (6%) and satellite programs (3%). "Clubs" are defined as children meeting with a volunteer Exploring 4-H leader and "school-age child care" refers to programs where children go instead of going home to an empty house. "Day camps" are typical summer programs offered for children and "library programs" are offered in the library during non-school hours. Several responded that they use a combination of programs such as a school-age child care program incorporating a summer day camp, etc. Some of the combinations were a bit unclear and will require further exploration.

Adaptations to the Existing Curriculum

Respondents were given an opportunity to comment if they were using the curriculum in a way different from the models. Some had used the curriculum with different audiences such as girl scouts, youth groups, and for environmental youth audiences.

They also indicated that they integrated Exploring 4-H with other curriculum materials such as existing Mini 4-H programs, and one school program for handicapped students used it in a "whole language approach to the curriculum." Some indicated that they used local citizens as guest speakers.

Curriculum Used

Exploring 4-H was originally introduced with 16 theme topics. Five additional theme topics have been added and others are continually being developed. We wanted to know which theme topics were being used most and how leaders evaluated them.

Theme topics which focused on self-esteem, self care, and nutrition were generally used more often than those that focused on the physical sciences such as magnets and geology. An exception was the dinosaur unit, which is also used often. Day camps and libraries, however, most used curriculum themes focused on the physical sciences.

The five new theme topics were not compared since they have not been available as long and have not been as widely distributed. However, they are listed here from most used to least used: Recycling; Trees, Leaves, and Bark; Water Wonders; Bird Basics; and Down the Drain.

When asked if the lesson plan format was easy to use, 68% of those returning surveys indicated "yes," and none indicated "no." Thirty-two percent did not respond to this question. We would like to assume that a non-response is a positive response, but at this point that assumption cannot be made. Comments included the desire for more theme topics, including more science and animals. This seemed unusual since the existing science programs were not used as much as some of the others. A question

remains as to whether the existing science themes are somehow inappropriate or don't fit the project areas of the classic 4-H program. Other providers indicated they would like the lessons simpler, and that the children enjoyed the theme topics. The children's enjoyment is the chief reason the providers continued to use the theme topics.

Selection of Topics

In 4-H we encourage youth participation and youth/adult interaction. Therefore, we wanted to determine who selects the theme topics. In general, topics were selected mostly by adults (75%). That breaks down to Exploring 4-H leaders (44%), Extension agents (23%), and parents (8%). In only 12% of the cases were the theme topics selected by children. Other responses (13%) included 4-H Junior Leaders and activity coordinators. Some of the responses indicate a combination of people choosing the theme topics.

Differences did exist between delivery modes. In the school-age child care programs more of a variety of people selected the theme topics, whereas in clubs, leaders made most of the decisions. This is particularly significant since 4-H values youth participation in decision making.

Impact of the Exploring 4-H Program

In general, setting was not a factor in whether providers determined the program to be successful. Regardless of setting, providers reported that the children not only learned but also enjoyed the activities and that the provider enjoyed working with the children through the curriculum materials. Providers also indicated that their enrollment had either increased since the use of the curriculum materials or had the potential for increased participation.

The following comments reflect parent and provider satisfaction:

- Participants gained new knowledge and had lots of fun while learning. Leaders gained confidence and higher self-esteem by teaching and working with the kids. Parents were recruited to help with activity groups and their support given was fantastic! Lots of parents were willing to help!

- When asked to comment on community impact, one provider commented, "Keeping our 6-13 year olds active and interested. Before Exploring we often ran out of ideas and they sometimes became bored."

However, a difference between settings did emerge between the club setting and other programs; in particular, after-school child care programs. In clubs, the non-competitive format of the activities was an issue, especially with providers who had been involved in classic 4-H programs as a leader or 4-H'er. Some were disappointed because classic 4-H programs focus on projects, competition, and county and state fairs. In the after-school program this was not only of no concern, but the emphasis on non-competitive activities was appreciated for its appropriateness to this age group. The providers in the after-school programs also commented that the program received

positive comments from parents. The parents appreciated the educational activities being offered in the after-school program.

Because non-competitive activities are developmentally appropriate for school-age children, we continue to focus on the theme topics in this way. Despite some club leaders' concern over the lack of competition, this survey indicates progress is being made in educating leaders about non-competition. Seventy-three percent (73%) of participants received a participation ribbon or certificate (*not* a competition "blue ribbon"). Only 7% still received blue, red, and white competition ribbons. The rest (20%) received other forms of positive reinforcement such as Exploring 4-H ribbons, a day at the fair, or an activity booth at the fair.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Initially we wanted to improve the younger 4-H youth programs in Indiana to consist of age appropriate activities, not be competitive. We also wanted to have the flexibility to allow the program to meet the needs of the community and be used in a variety of settings. The responses to this survey indicate a new direction for younger 4-H youth programs in Indiana. Though we are making progress, there is still a need to continue to educate leaders, agents, parents, school-age child care directors and teachers as to appropriate programs for younger youth.

Therefore, we recommend:

1. The continued use of the Exploring 4-H curriculum materials because they are flexible and can be used effectively in a variety of settings.

2. Youth should be involved in the selection of the Exploring 4-H theme topics, especially in club settings where the philosophy of the program is youth participation in decision making.

3. There needs to be a continued effort to educate providers and parents on age appropriate activities for this age group, with non-competition being an important issue.

The evaluation of the Exploring 4-H program was essential in the formulation of these recommendations. Based on this survey, we believe that a single curriculum can be used in a variety of settings to provide age appropriate activities for children. The curriculum can be used as well to provide children an opportunity to come together with adults, teens, and peers for social interaction and fun hands-on learning activities. In school-age child care programs, this curriculum also provides children with needed after-school care, a vital issue of the 1990's.